

Spanish Imperial Eagle (*Aquila adalberti*) – Spain



Photo: Ministerio de Medio Ambiente (WikiMedia Commons)

Conservation status	IUCN Global/EU27: Vulnerable EU: Threatened
Protection status	BD: Annex I CMS: Appendix I and II Bern Convention: Annex I and II
Population (2008-2012)	EU27 Breeding: 360 – 380 pairs ES Breeding: 358 pairs
MS reported increases	ES, PT
Other MS	-

Summary: The Spanish Imperial Eagle is a European endemic species that was close to global extinction in the 1960s, as a result of poisoning, electrocution from electricity towers and habitat degradation. The improvement in its conservation status has been achieved through a concerted programme of LIFE Nature projects. The most important drivers to the success of these conservation measures have been the initial research that was conducted on the main threats to the species, the coordinated action that took place through national and regional action plans, as well as the wide implementation of key measures. These included the modification of electricity structures, legal protection and enforcement to reduce poisoning, and habitat management measures that engaged all key stakeholders. No new measures are urgently required for this species as it is now recovering in all its range states, but continued conservation management is necessary to support its populations in the Iberian Peninsula.

Background

Status and EU occurrence

The Spanish Imperial Eagle¹ (also known as the Iberian Imperial Eagle) is endemic to Europe, where it occurs in central and south-west Spain and adjacent areas of Portugal. The world population fell to 34 pairs in 1974, becoming extinct in Portugal. In 1995, in Spain there were only 147 nesting pairs across five autonomous regions: Castilla La Mancha, Castilla y León, Extremadura, Madrid, and Andalucía, but the species has subsequently shown a fairly steady recovery particularly since 2000 (Deinet *et al*, 2013).

Its strongholds are in Extremadura, Ciudad Real and areas in the north of Huelva and Seville's Sierra Norte. According to the Member States' Article 12 report for 2008-12, the species' population in Spain was 358 pairs and 11-18 pairs in Portugal (ETC-BD, 2018). The report also indicated that the species' EU population had increased over the short-term and long-term, in both Spain and Portugal (see Annex 1). The most recent total population estimate for 2016 is 970 individuals (BirdLife International, 2018). Despite these population increases the Spanish Imperial Eagle's overall status remains threatened according to the ETC-BD (2018) or vulnerable according to IUCN criteria (BirdLife International, 2015, 2018).

Ecological requirements

The success of the species is closely linked to rural habitats, created and maintained by people over centuries through traditional management techniques. Given the right environment, the productivity of the Spanish Imperial Eagle is relatively high when compared with that of other large eagles (Silva *et al*, 2014).

The species mainly inhabits dehesa woodlands and cork oak forests, but also occurs on the flood plains and dunes of the Guadalquivir marshes and mountain slopes in the Sistema Central, where irrigated farmland is absent. It primarily feeds on European Rabbits (*Oryctolagus cuniculus*), but also occasionally takes rodents and

¹ Natura 2000 species code 2952

hares, and birds such as pigeons, and reptiles. As a result of its preference for rabbits, their abundance and distribution influence the eagles' population density, range (Fernández *et al*, 2009) and reproductive performance.

Breeding birds are sedentary, with median home range sizes of 28,000 ha during the breeding period and 10,500 ha in the non-breeding season (González and Margalida, 2008). Within Doñana National Park, Spain, tree height and distance from human activity are the most important variables explaining nest site selection (Bisson *et al*, 2002), but many recently-colonised territories are located in human-modified habitat, especially farmland with high rabbit abundance (González and Oria, 2004; Castaño 2005; González *et al*, 2006; Margalida *et al*, 2007).

Pressures and threats

As a naturally long-lived species with relatively low breeding success rates its populations are particularly susceptible to increases in rates of adult mortality. According to the Member State Article 12 reports and published research the main threats to the species currently result from electrocution, accidental and deliberate poisoning and habitat change. In a study that examined the death of 267 Spanish Imperial Eagles between 1989 and 2004, 91.7% of the causes of mortality (where the cause of death could be determined) were of human origin (González and Margalida, 2008), with electrocution and poisoning being by far the most common causes of death, resulting in 115 and 74 deaths respectively. Other causes of death were shooting (16 cases) and disease (13 cases).

Other pressures include habitat fragmentation as a result of deforestation for agriculture and timber, and suitable habitat in breeding and dispersal areas has also declined as a consequence of urban development and other land-use changes. Breeding success has also been affected by declines in rabbit populations as a result of myxomatosis in the 1950s, and more recently viral haemorrhagic disease (Margalida *et al*, 2007). This has been exacerbated by changes in the management of hunting estates to favour larger quarry species, such as deer and boar, rather than rabbits and partridges (Cabezas-Díaz, pers comm). Human disturbance (eg tourism) of nesting birds can reduce breeding success (González *et al*, 2006; Margalida *et al*, 2007) and the ingestion of lead shot embedded in the flesh of prey items may be a problem in certain areas in the long term as it can result in heavy metal bioaccumulation (Pain *et al*, 2005; González and Oria, 2004). The installation of wind turbines and solar power plants also pose an increasing threat for the conservation of the species (Cabezas-Díaz, pers comm).

Drivers of improvements: actors, actions and their implementation approaches

Organisers, partners, supporters and other stakeholders

Since 1987, national and regional governments have been implementing conservation measures for the Spanish Imperial Eagle, in collaboration with several organisations, including WWF and SEO/BirdLife Spain and municipalities. In the early 1990s, the five Regional Governments in the eagle's range came together with the Directorate-General for Nature Conservation of the National Environment Ministry to agree a Coordinated Recovery Plan for the species, and a set of linked LIFE projects in three stages across the five regions was developed. The first set of projects started in 1992, with the third finishing by 2000 (Silva *et al*, 2014).

Each region published a species action plan (SAP), i.e. recovery plan, for the species and a National Conservation Strategy was also produced, which was formally approved in July 2001 (Silva *et al*, 2014). Different Regional Authorities and national government departments established a LIFE programme Steering Committee. From 1997, the group became known as the Imperial Eagle Task Force (Silva *et al*, 2014). Engagement with private landowners and the electricity supply sector has also been important.

Contributions / relevance of strategic plans (e.g. species action plans)

A crucial element of the conservation of the Spanish Imperial Eagle has been the development of SAPs (as referred to above), both at the regional and national level, which reviewed the evidence of the threats to the species and identified a concerted and comprehensive set of conservation measures to address them. This included a European SAP initially published in 1996 (Gonzalez, 1996), and subsequently in 2008 (Sánchez *et al*, 2008), as well as a national SAP for Spain. These plans played an important role in coordinating actions and obtaining funding for them.

However, the SAPs have not been reviewed for some years and three out of four regional plans have expired. The only regional SAP that is currently in force relates to the region of Andalucía and covers the period 2014-

2018 (Junta de Andalucía, 2015). An update of the plans is necessary since the species has significantly expanded its distribution to other areas (Cabezas-Díaz, pers comm).

Measures taken and their effectiveness

The measures taken by Spain for the conservation of the species are listed below.

Application of conservation measures for *Aquila adalberti* for 2007-2012 in Spain

Measure	Type	Ranking	Inside/outside N2k	Broad Evaluation
6.4 - Manage landscape features	Administrative Contractual Recurrent	High	Both	Maintain Enhance Long-term
2.2 - Adapting crop production	Administrative Recurrent	Medium	Inside	Not Evaluated
3.2 - Adapt forest management	Administrative Recurrent	Medium	Inside	Not Evaluated
8.2 - Specific management of traffic and energy transport systems	Administrative Recurrent	Medium	Both	Long-term
7.4 - Specific single species or species group management measures	Administrative Recurrent	High	Inside	Long-term Not Evaluated
7.0 - Other species management measures	Administrative One Off	Low	Inside	Not Evaluated
9.1 - Regulating/Management exploitation of natural resources on land	Administrative One Off	Medium	Inside	Not Evaluated
3.1 - Restoring/improving forest habitats	Administrative Recurrent	Medium	Inside	Not Evaluated
6.1 - Establish protected areas/sites	Legal Administrative	High	Both	Maintain Enhance Long-term
6.3 - Legal protection of habitats and species	Legal Administrative	High	Both	Maintain Enhance Long-term

Source: Spain's Article 12 report available at https://bd.eionet.europa.eu/activities/Reporting/Article_12/Reports_2013

The protection of key breeding and wintering sites has undoubtedly underpinned conservation measures for these species. According to Member State reporting data 68% of the species breeding and wintering population occurs with Natura 2000 sites in Spain, and 55% in Portugal (EEA/ETC-BD, undated).

A major effort has been made to reduce the electrocution of birds on power lines. The LIFE projects led to agreements with public electricity companies on modifying power lines to reduce their threat to birds. As a result, from 1991-1999, 14,370 dangerous electric towers were modified, considerably reducing deaths from electrocution (BirdLife International, 2016) although not all mitigation measures have proved to be totally effective for this species. Furthermore, by 2008, a Spanish Royal Decree was published governing technical regulations for high tension power lines to protect birds (Silva *et al.*, 2014). Recent work has also been carried out to isolate dangerous powerlines on private farms (Cabezas-Díaz, pers comm).

Important conservation measures have also been taken through the 'Alzando el Vuelo' (Flying High) programme of SEO/BirdLife (BirdLife in Spain) and the private land protection of Fundación de Amigos del Aguila Imperial (FAAI). This has engaged national authorities, local communities and private landowners in conserving and protecting the Spanish Imperial Eagles' habitat. Under this, agreements have been signed with landowners who manage their land sympathetically for the species. This has created an extensive network over 54 municipalities with nearly 50% of breeding pairs covered by such projects (BirdLife International, 2016). Work is on-going to raise awareness and support on private land where the species breeds, including improving habitat management (Cabezas-Díaz, pers comm).

According to BirdLife International (2016) other conservation measures that have been taken include a supplementary feeding programme to mitigate the effects of rabbit decreases, which has significantly increased breeding success. Nest surveillance has also reduced disturbance and improved reproductive success.

As a result of habitat fragmentation and the species' rather sedentary nature, dispersal and recolonisation is hampered. To overcome this, the recovery has been aided by reintroduction measures. This was initially

undertaken in Doñana to reinforce the much depleted and isolated population there. From 2002 to 2011, 73 young birds were released in Cádiz as part of a reintroduction project, and by 2012 five breeding pairs had become established in the province. Although these birds appear to be subject to high mortality associated with powerlines (BirdLife International, 2016) the establishment of a breeding population in Cádiz has further reduced the overall probability of their extinction (Muriel *et al.* 2011). Two birds originating from a reintroduction project in Andalucía are also known to have bred in Portugal (BirdLife International, 2016).

Funding sources (current and long-term) and costs (one-off and ongoing)

The total costs of the conservation are not known as key funding sources are not fully documented. The LIFE Nature Programme has played a major role in the species recovery, in particular through the 23 projects listed in Annex 1. Together these amount to at least €26 million over the period 1992 – 2007. This constitutes by far the main source of funding for the conservation of the species.

It is estimated that nearly €2.6 million were spent on the mitigation of bird electrocution in Andalucía during 1992–2009 (BirdLife International, 2016). A total of €12 million were leveraged from the National Government and Community funds such as the European Regional Development Fund to fund modification of power lines in the 2004-2007 period (Silva *et al.*, 2014).

Funding sources for the ‘Alzando el Vuelo’ (Flying High) programme, which started in 2006, came from Adif (Administrador de Infraestructuras Ferroviarias, Spanish state owned railway infrastructure manager), Fundación Biodiversidad (multidisciplinary team currently under Ministry for Ecological Transition) and Obra Social Caja Madrid. Funding to conserve the species has also been sourced from other bank entities and NGOs (Cabezas-Díaz, pers comm).

Future actions

At the moment the conservation of the species remains dependent on the continuation of intensive conservation measures, and stricter enforcement of protection measures appears to be necessary as poisoning and other forms of persecution remain an issue, even though attitudes towards the Spanish Imperial Eagle have improved. Wind turbines and solar power plants pose an increasing threat and therefore they need to be placed away from key areas for the species (Cabezas-Díaz, pers comm).

Continued habitat management and enhancement is also a high priority and in the longer term habitat restoration will be needed to reduce habitat fragmentation and thereby increasing the viability of subpopulations, dispersal between them and recolonisation (Cabezas-Díaz, pers comm).

Achievements

Impacts on the target species

There is little doubt that the conservation measures taken to date have been the main cause of the recovery of this species in both Spain and Portugal. The Spanish population is estimated to have increased by 135% from 2001 to 2012 (BirdLife International, 2015) and the species recolonised Portugal in 2003. According to the most recent published data 358 pairs were counted in Spain in 2012, giving an overall estimate of c.370-380 pairs, and the Portuguese population was estimated at 11-18 pairs in 2013; so the current total population is around 1,100 individuals (BirdLife International, 2015).

Without such actions the Spanish Imperial Eagle may well have become extinct. However, the recovery may also have been aided by changes in social attitudes towards birds of prey, and recoveries in the species' main prey (rabbits) from disease outbreaks. Attitudes to the Spanish Imperial Eagle have significantly improved and effective measures were established to increase the European rabbit populations through management agreements with land owners and hunting managers. It should be noted, however, that progress has not been made in relation to the use of lead shot among hunters despite the availability of other (more expensive) type of ammunition (Cabezas-Díaz, pers comm).

Other impacts (e.g. other habitats and species, ecosystem services, economic and social)

The conservation of the species has also supported the economy in certain rural areas. For instance, in Extremadura the local economy has benefited from an increase in the number of permanent jobs created for the protection of the species and the employment generated by the increase of tourism in the area (Silva *et al.*, 2014). In addition, the actions that were implemented with the objective of increasing the populations of the

European rabbit benefited a wide range of species such as Iberian Lynx (*Lynx pardinus*), Cinereous Vulture (*Aegypius monachus*) and Bonelli's Eagle (*Hieraetus fasciatus*) (Cabezas-Díaz, pers comm).

Conclusions and lessons learnt

The key targeted conservation measures that led to the improvements

- Research that provided a reliable understanding of the species' ecology and the key factors that were causing its decline.
- The development of SAPs with coherent and coordinated programmes of measures.
- The species was a focus of a great deal of conservation effort, involving national/regional and NGO conservation organisation, and engaged land owners and other important stakeholders.
- Protection of a large proportion of the species' key sites in the Natura 2000 network and other protected areas.
- Concerted and carefully targeted efforts to reduce the key causes of adult mortality (as such long-lived species are particularly vulnerable to this), namely electrocution and accidental and deliberate poisoning.
- Habitat conservation measures, to increase the area of suitable habitat and breeding success rates.
- Targeted reintroduction measures to reinforce critically small sub-populations and to overcome barriers to recolonisation such as habitat fragmentation and the species' low levels of dispersal.

Conservation measures that have not been sufficiently effective

- No significant progress has been made on reducing the use of lead shot for hunting.

Factors that supported the conservation measures

- The availability of continuous funding that could be specifically targeted towards the species' conservation needs, in particular the LIFE Nature programme action grants.
- The species' risk of global extinction and iconic status helped to increase awareness of its plight and win over widespread support for conservation measures.
- Generally changing social attitudes towards birds of prey and increasing recreational interests in bird watching and nature provided a supportive background for the conservation measures.

Factors that constrained conservation measures

- Increasing urbanisation and infrastructure development, habitat change and fragmentation.
- Limitations on available funding for habitat conservation measures such as through agri-environment schemes from Rural Development Programmes, and limited impacts from some agri-environment schemes due to their design and low levels of compliance.
- Increasing recreation and tourism in some areas, leading to increasing nest disturbance.
- Natural diseases in the species' prey population.

Quick wins that could be applied elsewhere for the species

- No quick measures are currently required for this species as it is now recovering in all its range states, but continued conservation management is necessary.

Examples of good practice, which could be applied to other habitats and species

- The development and implementation of coherent conservation measures targeted to the key factors affecting the species' population status (i.e. adult mortality) at sufficient scale to have population level impacts.
- The creation of legal instruments that result in effective measures such as ensuring that new electricity installations are designed to minimise the risk posed to birds of prey.
- Engagement of all key stakeholders in the conservation of the species.
- Development of a programme of habitat conservation measures through management agreements with landowners.

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Authorship

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Annex 1. Spanish Imperial Eagle (*Aquila adalberti*) conservation status at Member State and EU levels

Increasing	+	Stable	0	Unknown	x	Decreasing	-	Fluctuating	F	Uncertain	U
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	Breeding population				Breeding range				Wintering population			
	Short-term		Long-term		Short-term		Long-term		Short-term		Long-term	
ES	2001-12	+	1984-2012	+	2001-12	+	1980-2012	+	2001-12	+	1984-2012	+
PT	2003-13	+		NA	2003-13	+		NA		x		NA
EU overall		+		+		+		+		+		+

Source: Member State Article 12 reports on *Aquila adalberti*, as compiled by ETC-BD on EIONET.

Annex 2. LIFE Nature Projects in Spain that aimed to help conserve the Spanish Imperial Eagle

Project Title	Project N°	Country	Type Of Beneficiary
Aguila Andalucía - First phase of a conservation programme for the Iberian Imperial Eagle- Andalucía	LIFE92 NAT/E/014300	ES	Regional authority
Aguila/Castilla la Mancha - First phase of a conservation programme for the Iberian imperial eagle- Castilla la Manche	LIFE92 NAT/E/014301	ES	Regional authority
Aguila/Castilla León - First phase of a conservation programme for the Iberian Imperial Eagle- Castilla y León	LIFE92 NAT/E/014302	ES	Regional authority
Aguila/Com.Madrid - First phase of a conservation programme for the Iberian Imperial Eagle - Comunidad de Madrid	LIFE92 NAT/E/014304	ES	Regional authority
Aguila/Extremadura - First phase of a conservation programme for the Iberian Imperial Eagle - Extremadura	LIFE92 NAT/E/014303	ES	Regional authority
II phase of an action program for the conservation of the Imperial Eagle- Andalucía	LIFE94 NAT/E/004823	ES	Regional authority
II phase of an action program for the conservation of the Imperial Eagle- Castilla La Mancha	LIFE94 NAT/E/004824	ES	Regional authority
II phase of an action program for the conservation of the Imperial Eagle- Extremadura	LIFE94 NAT/E/004825	ES	Regional authority
II phase of an action program for the conservation of the Imperial Eagle- Madrid	LIFE94 NAT/E/004826	ES	Regional authority
Conservation programme for the Iberian Imperial Eagle(2nd phase) - Castilla y León	LIFE94 NAT/E/001044	ES	Regional authority
Third phase of an action programme for the conservation of the Imperial Eagle - Extremadura	LIFE95 NAT/E/001150	ES	Regional authority
Aguila Castilla La Mancha - Third phase of an action programme for the conservation of the Iberian Imperial Eagle (Aquila Adalberti) - Castilla La Mancha	LIFE95 NAT/E/000593	ES	Regional authority
Third phase of an action program for the conservation of the Iberian Imperial Eagle - Castilla y León.	LIFE95 NAT/E/001151	ES	Regional authority
Third phase of an action program for the conservation of Imperial Eagle - Madrid.	LIFE95 NAT/E/001152	ES	Regional authority
Third phase of an action program for the conservation of the Iberian Imperial Eagle - Andalucía.	LIFE95 NAT/E/001153	ES	Regional authority
CBD/especies - Conservation of the Imperial eagle, Black vulture, Black stork and Iberian lynx on private protected land in Extremadura and Castilla-La-Mancha	LIFE99 NAT/E/006336	ES	NGO- Foundation
Cabañeros - Conservation of the threatened fauna and vegetation in the Cabañeros National Park	LIFE99 NAT/E/006327	ES	Park- Reserve authority
ZEPA La Serena - Management of the PSA-SCI 'La Serena y Sierras periféricas'	LIFE00 NAT/E/007348	ES	Local authority
CBD 2003 - Conservation of the Spanish Imperial Eagle, Black Vulture, Black Stork	LIFE03 NAT/E/000050	ES	NGO- Foundation
Reintroducción Lince Andalucía - Conservation and reintroduction of the Iberian lynx in Andalucía	LIFE06 NAT/E/000209	ES	Regional authority
Priorimancha - Conservation of Mediterranean priority species in Castille-La Mancha	LIFE07 NAT/E/000742	ES	Park- Reserve authority
Campanarios de Azaba - Biodiversity conservation in western Iberia	LIFE07 NAT/E/000762	ES	NGO- Foundation
Innovation against poison - Innovative actions against illegal poisoning in EU Mediterranean pilot areas.	LIFE09 NAT/ES/000533	ES	NGO- Foundation

Source: Life Programme database, projects with *Aquila adalberti* listed as a key word